

May 10, 2007

WASHINGTON - Continuing his commitment to improving the safety and security of the American people, U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL), member of the House Homeland Security Committee, voted on Wednesday to help pass the 2008 Homeland Security Department funding bill.

The Department of Homeland Security Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 (H.R. 1684) , which approves \$39.8 billion for Homeland Security programs in the budget year beginning October 1, 2007, passed the House by a 296-126 vote. Congressman Bilirakis had worked closely, and in a bipartisan fashion, with his colleagues on the Homeland Security Committee to move H.R. 1684 to the full House for a vote.

On Wednesday, Homeland Security Committee Ranking Member Peter King (R-NY) thanked Congressman Bilirakis for his efforts on the Committee to produce this legislation. "I'd like to thank Rep. Bilirakis for his hard work and leadership on these issues," Ranking Member King said. "He understands that we need to enact strong policies in order to ensure the continued security of our homeland, and I salute him for his efforts on this legislation."

Although Congressman Bilirakis voted for final passage of H.R. 1684, he expressed disappointment that the original legislation passed out of the Homeland Security Committee had not remained intact. After the House Homeland Security Committee had unanimously approved the legislation, nearly 40 provisions had been stripped by a Manager's Amendment offered by House Democratic leaders.

"I believe that this bill represents a missed opportunity to enhance our country's immigration enforcement, help stop terrorism, and improve our ability to respond should the unthinkable happen again," said Bilirakis during debate on the House floor. "Though I plan to support its final passage here, I implore my friends on the other side of the aisle to work with us to move forward on the many bipartisan provisions which would have made this bill much better."

An amendment offered by Congressman Bilirakis was among those stripped from H.R. 1684. Bilirakis had secured a provision to establish a pilot program for mobile biometric identification of apprehended aliens at sea (Sec. 906).

"H.R. 1684 currently includes an amendment I sponsored that was adopted during the Committee's consideration of this bill which would improve maritime immigration enforcement," Rep. Bilirakis said. "This capability is critically important since we currently do not have the ability to verify the identity of apprehended migrants, previous immigration violators, criminals, and possible terrorists in the maritime environment."

Despite the numerous provisions gutted from the H.R. 1684, Congressman Bilirakis joined with his colleagues in successfully approving a GOP proposal - as a motion-to-recommit - adding a provision to the final bill that would strengthen an important terrorist screening

program.

He also supported an amendment that would address the discrepancies that currently exist between federal and Florida State port credentialing programs. Bilirakis had raised this very issue during a Homeland Security Committee hearing last month.

“I have met with federal and state maritime officials about this issue, and will continue to work with them and monitor their progress toward finding a satisfactory resolution, said Bilirakis. “This amendment will certainly provide them with another layer of encouragement and support.”

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